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APPROACHING OLD PROBLEMS IN NEW WAYS: SOCIAL WORK TRAINING USING COMMUNITY EDUCATION AS A PRIMARY PREVENTION STRATEGY TO COMBAT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

ABSTRACT

Engaging communities in addressing gender-based violence has become a strategy in the global prevention of gender-based violence. Community education can take many forms and can provide viable alternatives to ad hoc programming. It adds up individual interventions, sequences them into a logical progression, strives to build on what is achieved, and has an overview on how various activities slowly come together to change the social climate. Community education is responsive, participatory and based on a holistic analysis of the root causes of gender-based violence (Michau, 2007). As Heise (1996) argues, prevention holds powerful potential: ‘the most important shift the anti-violence groups could make to improve their effectiveness is to place greater emphasis on primary prevention’. This means changing ‘social norms and behaviours that promote gender-based violence’ (Heise, 1996, p.25). In response to this, forty nine (49) year four social work students from the Specialised Methods and Fields III Module on Gender-Based Violence Prevention Strategies (2016) at the University of Namibia have been exploring and experimenting with community education as a primary prevention strategy that seeks to shift attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender-based violence. The goal in applying the community education method was to explore and encourage the application of knowledge and skills to various types of practices aimed at ending gender-based violence through the work-integrated learning theory. In this article, the author is reflecting on the community education method where students’ acquisition of knowledge is informed by the needs of the society, and students form part of the people who formulate solutions to address problems the community is facing. The author shares some of the lessons learned from this process in Windhoek over a semester (6months) course, where students were tasked to approach old problems (gender-based violence) in new ways by designing and implementing anti-gender-based violence community education campaigns and posters on gender-based violence prevention strategies, targeting different audiences.

The paper begins by setting forth a rationale for engaging the year four social work students in gender-based violence prevention efforts at community level. Students were divided into groups of five and attached to organisations in and around Windhoek, mostly Katutura and Khomasdal, where they engaged with various communities in the informal settlements and participated in community-driven anti-gender based violence campaigns. As part of their academic assessment, students were required to submit written group assignments on the design and implementation of the anti-gender based violence community education campaigns and posters with key messages on prevention strategies. After designing and implementing these campaigns and posters, students were required to conduct in class face-to-face poster presentations where they had to share and reflect on their experiences, share lessons learnt and recommendations. This teaching method was beneficial for the lecturers, students and the communities because students were involved in addressing and responding to societal challenges such as gender-based violence. Students, through the work-integrated learning theory, had an opportunity to implement anti-gender-based violence campaigns within communities

by learning through needs assessments, stakeholder consultative meetings, designing of community education campaigns and development of key messages on prevention strategies for the posters.

The article describes the theoretical underpinnings of the community education method and illustrates how these come to life in day-to-day programming in communities. The author recommends exploring community education as a pedagogical learning theory is essential if we are to see meaningful, sustained change on the issue of gender-based violence. Community education can have positive learning outcomes in helping students become aware of the social issues and challenges facing their societies and developing problem-solving and reflection skills. The author concludes that the commitment of social work training to use community education as a primary prevention strategy to combat gender-based violence in order to improve positive graduate outcomes, global citizenship and community engagement, add extra dimensions to the importance of work-integrated learning in curriculum design and development as a process of Harambee (Swahili) meaning “*all pull together*”, that can benefit students, professions, workplaces and communities.

Keywords: Community education, gender-based violence prevention, social work education and practice

1. INTRODUCTION

How can the training of Social Work students contribute to addressing the scourge of gender-based violence? Challenged by this question, the author, as a social work course instructor, had to rethink the way she teaches by examining her approach. In response to examining her teaching approach, the author used community education as a pedagogical learning method in the Social Work Gender-based Violence Prevention Strategies Module whereby students had to approach old problems (gender-based violence) in new ways.

The goal in applying community education as a teaching and learning method was to explore and encourage students' application of knowledge and skills to various types of practices aimed at ending gender-based violence through making students participate in the work-integrated learning theory during the first semester (2016). This article explores the use of in-class, work-integrated learning and pedagogical teaching methods by focusing on their potential effect on practice outside the classroom. As a social work educator, the author emphasises the importance of building interventions on a solid foundation of theoretical knowledge. The Specialised Methods and Fields III course on Gender-based Violence Prevention Strategies was informed and designed from stakeholders' input, in order to allow the Bachelor of Arts Degree in the Social Work Training programme greater responsiveness and flexibility to meet the demands of local context and workforce needs, and to respond to students and community needs. In this pedagogical approach, the author attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice, even if this is not always a straightforward endeavor (Lu, Dane, & Gellman, 2005; Novak, 1995; Vayda & Bogo, 1991). In response to this, the Social Work department, in close collaboration with the Ecumenical Social Diaconate Action (ESDA), an organisation that offers a safe place for abused women and children, held a capacity building workshop with the 4th year Social Work students with a devoted focus on equipping the students with skills to address gender-based violence. The capacity building workshop started with a topic on: “*Change starts with me*” and ended with “*Use your power with and within positively: not over*” in order to bring about change.

This article argues that students do not only have a dislike of theory, which they feel is far removed from their interest of helping people, but many also have difficulty in applying it without practical exposure. The social work training, therefore, provided a rigorous academic grounding and an appropriate professional preparation through work-integrated learning. This approach assisted the social work students to see how their coursework is relevant to their practice (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Carniol, 2000). As a course instructor, it was not enough to only teach students about the importance of theory on gender-based violence prevention strategies; but as Novak (1995) argued, Social Work education should challenge the gap between theory and practice by challenging not only the content, but also the process of learning. Pedagogical learning through conducting community education has been proposed as a model favoring a balance between content and process. Relying on the work of several educators, Lu, Dane and Gellman (2005) argue that despite its diverse meanings, pedagogical learning can be defined as a process by which students learn by being actively involved in their own experiences. Beyond simply learning by doing, pedagogical learning favors the development of critical thinking skills (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) and the value of peer interaction (Gitterman, 2004). In their pedagogical learning model, Gibbons and Gray (2004) propose four interconnected components: (a) integration of theory and practice, classroom and field, (b) critical thinking skills, (c) collaboration, and (d) self-directed and independent learning. This pedagogical approach to work-integrated learning through community education has favored the principles of critical thinking, participation, interaction, and integration of theory and practice. Findings indicated that the use of community education through the pedagogical learning method assisted lecturers greatly in linking theory to practice and helped students in developing their critical thinking skills.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (METHODS USED)

There is an increasing emphasis on using community education as a pedagogical learning method and prevention strategy to combat gender-based violence, because it integrates academic study and practical work experience, providing a point of difference for graduates who employers value.

In this way community education is designed to focus on improving positive graduate outcomes, global citizenship and community engagement, adding extra dimensions to the importance of work-integrated learning in curriculum design and development as a process of Harambee (Swahili), meaning ‘*All pull together*’, in benefiting students, professions, workplaces and communities. Through individualised and group discussions with students; written group assignments; field reports by students as they examined their own learning experiences; critical reflections by lecturers using pedagogical learning; students assessments and achievements of specific course learning objectives; and feedback from the communities which hosted students, the quality of teaching and learning was analysed.

The year 4 Social Work Violence Preventative Strategies module took on community education as a pedagogical learning approach, whereby individual consultations were held with the following organisations respectively, namely; the National Youth Services, the Council of Churches in Namibia, Women Solidarity, Friendly Haven, Outright Namibia, Regain Trust Namibia and the Katutura Youth Resource Centre from the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Students were divided into groups of five and attached to these organisations in and around Windhoek, mostly Katutura and Khomasdal where they engaged with various communities in the informal settlements and participated in community-driven anti-gender based violence campaigns. As part of their academic assessment, students were required to submit written group assignments on the design and implementation of the anti-gender based

violence community education campaigns and posters with key messages on gender-based violence prevention strategies. After designing and implementing these campaigns and posters, they were required to conduct face-to-face in class presentations, sharing and reflecting on their experiences, lessons learnt and recommendations.

3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The pedagogical teaching approach through community education was beneficial for the social work students, the lecturers and the communities because students were involved in addressing and responding to societal challenges such as gender-based violence. Students, through community education, had an opportunity to implement anti-gender based violence campaigns within the communities by learning through needs assessments, stakeholders' consultative meetings, designing of community education campaigns and developing of key messages for posters on gender-based violence prevention strategies. The following are some of the preliminary findings which revealed significant effects of students' participation in community service upon students' personal values and orientations:

- They developed programme and or project planning and designing skills,
- Academic benefits such as improved general academic performance, enhances critical thinking and analytic skills,
- Personal benefits such as increased self-awareness; communication skills, e.g. public speaking, increased motivation to learn; team work, leadership and co-operation; development of positive work values and ethics; and
- Deepened understanding of issues affecting communities.
- Skills developed: leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, team work and conflict and management skills, fundraising, planning, self-reflection.
- Personal growth and empathetic with the less privileged.
- Improved professional conduct.
- Increased desire to volunteer with community organisations.

Responses also included an unexpected finding where most social work students expressed a sense of empowerment and hopefulness that extended beyond the limits of the classroom course.

Students in the Social Work Gender based Violence Prevention Strategies Module indicated that they felt able to address gender-based violence should they encounter it in their practice, perhaps because they were able to do so during their attachments with community organisations. Beyond raising awareness that gender-based violence is a significant social issue, there was a related theme that primary prevention involves tangible skill-building and the nurturing of individual competencies to enact community-level changes. In other words, beyond just educating community members about the existence of gender-based violence, there is a distinct goal "to develop... skills in people to actually make a change". The programmatic activities that correspond with these goals included community education campaigns and posters with gender based violence prevention strategies. Community organisational representatives also emphasized that individual skill building as advocates and allies enabled them to become active change agents in their own communities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The author explored the potential impact of this pedagogical approach in social work training by using community education as a prevention strategy in combating gender-based violence and argues that it is essential if we are to see meaningful, sustained change on the issue of gender-based violence. Community education can have positive learning outcomes in helping students become aware of the social issues and challenges facing their societies. This paper recommends the commitment of social work training to use community education in order to improve positive graduate outcomes, global citizenship and community engagement, add extra dimensions to the importance of work-integrated learning in curriculum design and development as a process of Harambee (Swahili) meaning “*all pull together*”, that can benefit students, professions, workplaces and communities.

5. CONCLUSION

The theoretical concept that the author employed, mirrors that of pedagogical and work-integrated learning construction. This paper provides strong support for social work training to use community education as a pedagogical learning approach in extending teaching and learning beyond the confines of the classroom. While there is a role for imparting theoretical knowledge in more traditional ways, an important function can be played by pedagogical teaching methods. In February 2016, a new office of Industry and Cooperative Education was established at the author’s university in recognition of the importance of this approach to teaching and learning. This article proposes that pedagogical and work-integrated learning and teaching methods within the classroom may provide students with the opportunity to extend learning beyond classroom activities. The notions presented here should be further studied by examining the links between teaching methods and practice. It would be useful for research to be undertaken to examine the applicability of these ideas to other schools where pedagogical teaching is being undertaken. In conclusion, there is much to learn about the concrete impacts of pedagogical teaching methods on social work practice, but the reflections and information provided here offer a glimpse.

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